DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 057 078 TM 000 921

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TITLE Disadvantages of Feedback.
PUB DATE Feb 71
NOTE 8p.; From symposium "Feeding Back Information Collected From School Staffs," American Educational Research Association, New York, New York, February 1971

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies (Education); Data Collection; Educational Problems; *Educational Research; *Feedback; *Formative Evaluation; Human Relations; Information Utilization; Research Methodology; *Research Problems; *Research Utilization; Symposia; Validity

ABSTRACT

If feedback from educational research is not properly related or interpreted, it can often be more detrimental than beneficial. Five factors that should be kept in mind regarding feedback are: (1) varying interpretations of research findings depending on the user, (2) ethical-human aspects, (3) validity problems, (4) interaction effects, and (5) contamination of the original sample. Two case studies illustrating some of the above mentioned problems are presented. (CK)

ED057078

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# DISADVANTAGES OF FEEDBACK

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the
American Educational Research Association,
New York, New York, February, 1971

TM 000 921

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For many years school administrators and teachers have been voicing dissatisfaction with the work of educational researchers. Some of the most common criticisms are that researchers interrupt the practitioners' work in the schools; researchers often do not attack the really important problems facing education, consequently there is precious little payoff, in the form of improved educational practice, that results from all its time and money spent on educational research.

Recently a new criticism has emerged, namely, that researchers do not report back their findings to those who participated in studies. Practitioners state that they agree to participate in a study, they willingly give of their time and energy to cooperate with the research effort, but when the research is completed, no effort is made to tell them the results of the research. In short, they received no "feedback."

In response to this criticism, some researchers are making promises, when they secure the right to collect data, that they will "feed back" the findings to those who participated in the study.

The title of my presentation today is "The Disadvantages of Feedback." Perhaps a better title would be "Some Cautions to Those Who Promise Feedback." I wish to make it clear at the outset that I am quite favorably disposed to feedback, but I should like to describe some problems one faces when he feeds back that he does not encounter when he engages in standard research reporting.

And that one should consider these problems before he promises feedback so that he does not obligate himself to something he cannot or should not perform.

Perhaps it would be useful at this time for me to distinguish between standard research reporting and feedback.

Standard research reporting, as I am using the term, means the publication of research findings at meetings such as this, in journals or monographs, or other special purpose publications. A conscientious effort is made to disguise the identity of those who participated in the research study.

Feedback, on the other hand, means the direct reporting of research findings to those who participate in a study. The ability of the researcher to cloak the findings in anonymity is oftentimes greatly reduced. Feedback can occur as part of some intervention strategy (as some will describe today), or it can be presented at the completion of the study.

In discussing these concerns, let me first outline some considerations a researcher should keep in mind when he contemplates whether or not to promise feedback of his research findings. I will then briefly discuss two studies, one in which direct, open feedback would seem appropriate, and another study where feedback would seem unwise or at least it should be carefully structured.

First, what are some considerations the researcher should keep in mind when considering feedback?

1. Your findings have a greater likelihood of "making a difference." As we all know, one can complete marginal or exploratory research studies in education, and even if they are reported to a larger research audience, the results will likely have little or no immediate impact. The self- professed

limitations you place on your research will generally be acknowledged by other researchers and they will interpret your work in the light of their knowledge of the problems that plague your research efforts. Such interpretative precautions are not generally heeded by practitioners, and they are more likely to accept your work at face value. And you, the researcher, have to accept your share of the responsibility for whatever actions, however unjustified, may be taken on the basis of your feedback.

2. A second problem is closely related to the first; it is what I will label the ethical-human problem. This is a concern, particularly when the anonymity of the respondents cannot be effectively maintained. Suppose you find that a particular administrator or teacher, or combination thereof, bear a major responsibility for some undesirable condition in a school. Do you report this to everyone, to the person's superordinate, or only to the person involved? As I indicated earlier, your findings can make a difference in the lives of individuals. If you are reasonably confident that your findings are true, then you may be relieved of some burden of responsibility, but if there is reasonable disagreement over the validity of your findings, or if your conclusions are partially or conditionally true, or if your findings are subject to careful interpretation, then you may be exacerbating a problem that already exists, you may be perpetuating a problem that no longer exists, or you may indeed be creating a new problem. For example, we solicited the opinions of the teachers in a school about the adequacy of leadership being provided by the principal. Now this school had just gone through the agonies of a teachers' strike. The principal of the school had tended to personalize the militant actions of the teachers

and had become temporarily quite autocratic in his behavior. The teachers had reacted negatively to the principal's changed leadership style and the teachers' negativism was reflected in the data. Sometime later, after the antagonisms of the strike had receded and the relationships between the principal and teachers had returned almost to their former state of mutual confidence, we found the teachers' view of their principal as a leader had become once again more positive. Had we not returned to the school, and had we reported the earlier findings at a later date, we may have seriously, and unknowingly, affected the relationship between the principal and his teachers by reporting this "unstable" finding.

3. There is the validity problem. How do you know you are measuring what you claim to be measuring? Some variables are what I would refer to as hard data; that is, there is considerable agreement as to what the data mean. Examples are financial or enrollment data. Many other data, however, are what I would call "soft"; that is, they are constructs over which there is considerable difference of opinion as to what those constructs are and how they should be measured. Examples are such constructs as morale, intelligence, leadership, and social systems. Often these "soft" data are dynamic and very complicated.

4. There is an interactive effect. Suppose you decide "feedback" is desirable or necessary, but in an effort to lessen the human-ethical problem, you decide to give the participants in a research study, prior to the study, a fuller picture of your research intent than you would normally provide. By so doing, if the subjects agree to the study as described, and to the feedback you propose, you will be relieved of your ethical responsibilities. This may lighten your guilt problems, but in outlining the study in some detail you may well

influence the validity of the responses you receive from the research participants. That is, the subjects may manipulate their answers to your inquiries in such a way as to present themselves in a favorable light, during the feedback, and by so doing they will invalidate your findings.

5. Finally, once you have fed back some types of data to a school, that school should be considered "contaminated" insofar as it can be considered a "normal school". The interactions or introspection that may take place because of the feedback may be such that the school simply cannot be used for further research. This is not a problem, of course, if you are unconcerned about further research in that school or if inferences from subsequent research are not going to be made to other schools.

Now let me describe briefly two studies, one in which feedback would present few of the problems I have just described, and another study that is heavily burdened with them.

Suppose one were to conduct research to explore the relationship between the income of parents of children in school attendance areas, the measured academic achievement of pupils in those schools, and the financial expenditures by the district per school. And let us suppose that you find that the school with the lowest family income has the lowest achievement, and gets the lowest budgetary allocation from the district. The "feeding back" of such findings, even showing each school staff and parents where their particular school ranks on this scale, is not too difficult a problem. First, the data are relatively hard, though the achievement tests may be subject to some controversy. Second, it is difficult to attach blame on specific individuals for this condition, and this

indirectness lessens the chance of inappropriate actions based on your findings.

On the other hand, suppose you are going to examine the relationship between a principal's perceived leader behavior and teacher morale in several schools, and you promised feedback would include reporting back to each participating school how they compared with other schools. Let's suppose further that your hypothesis of a relationship between perceived poor leader behavior and low morale is supported, and that School X is a perfect example of that finding. How do you report to School X? Whatever caveats you may place on your findings may be ignored and people may act or react to your findings in unanticipated ways. And you cannot evade the responsibilities for their acts, however unjustified.

As we know, the constructs of "leadership" and "morale" are subject to some controversy, and there are those who will question the appropriateness of the instruments you have chosen to use. Also, these constructs are embedded in a complex, dynamic social system that is difficult to measure. For example, suppose you find a principal's perceived leader behavior is poor. Have you accounted for the historical dimension of that finding? Perhaps he is improving his leader-behavior and your feeding back of negative findings may well affect negatively his self-image, or the staff's or the superordinate's perception of him may be unfairly reinforced, and his poor leadership may become a permanent self-fulfilling prophecy. Thus his future career may be seriously in jeopardy. Finally, if you attempt to explain the research in any detail prior to data collection, to lessen the ethical problem, you may so contaminate the study that the findings will be of questionable validity.

In summary, feedback may indeed be an important activity for those who wish to maximize the impact of their research or who wish to increase the interest of practitioners in research. It is, however, not an unmixed blessing. And those who promise feedback might best consider the possible unintended results their feedback may have on the lives and careers of those who participated in the study and subsequently received the feedback.